

REVIEW Roman but Not Catholic: What Remains at Stake 500 Years after the Reformation by Jerry L. Walls and Kenneth J. Collins

Heiko Oberman. He suggests, citing recent scholarship, that the *regula fidei* as employed by Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria is best understood not as a rule for faith but as the rule constituted by faith or truth, that is, as “the historical acts of God’s action in creation and redemption.”<sup>14</sup> This means, then, that the *regula fidei* is not simply the means or the mechanism to communicate revelation, but what is more important, it also constitutes revelation itself since it is made up of both faith and truth. “The rule of faith,” Oberman observes, “is not to be regarded as authoritative interpretation of Holy Scripture. . . . [Rather] the rule of faith is revelation itself, the backbone and structure of Holy Scripture.”

el Kruger quotes J. I. Packer on this score: “The Church no more gave us the New Testament canon than Sir Isaac Newton gave us the force of gravity. God gave us gravity. . . . Newton did not create gravity but recognized it.”<sup>26</sup> Historians usually point to the Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter of Athanasius as the time (367) when this process bore its considerable fruit. Later councils, such as the Synod Hippo Regius in North Africa (393) and the Council of Carthage (397), simply reaffirmed a reality that had already existed in the ancient church. The canon emerged independently about the same time in the East, the West, and northern Africa. Simply put, Rome did not give us the Bible.

The terminology of “Old” and “New” Testaments did not arise in the early church until the latter part of the second century in the writings of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Clement of Alexandria.

one Roman Catholic apologist writes as follows: “The Jews at Jamnia had rejected Christ as God, let us not forget. Those who had accepted Christ had already become Christians. The remainder certainly had no rightful authority to decide anything about divine truth.”<sup>11</sup> This statement suggests that not only is Christian revelation essential to understanding the OT aright, but also the Jews themselves, oddly enough, are not even fit to recognize their own canon.

As Christopher M. Bellitto, a Roman Catholic scholar, puts it, “The pope could make infallible statements [when he speaks *ex cathedra*] on faith and morals on his own authority.”<sup>43</sup> Again, Bellitto writes: “The pope had the final say, he could judge all things and all persons, but he himself could be judged by no one.”

Catechism elaborates: “It is clear therefore that, in the supremely wise arrangement of God, sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture, and the Magisterium of the Church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others.”

Michael W. Holmes argues that “the consensus supporting this view (still defended in various forms) has largely collapsed and undermined primarily by (a) the recognition that the idea of an authoritative ‘council’ dealing with matters of canon at Jamnia is largely a myth.” Holmes, “The Biblical Canon,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 409.

He also takes care to point out that infallibility is often confused with certitude and insists that the argument for probable infallibility is not an attempt to achieve certitude.

The Incarnation is the antecedent of the doctrine of Mediation, and the archetype both of the Sacramental principle and the merits of the Saints. From the doctrine of Mediation follow the Atonement, the Mass, the merits of Martyrs and Saints, their invocation and cultus. From the Sacramental principle come the Sacraments properly so called; the unity of the Church, and the Holy See as its type and centre; the authority of Councils; the sanctity of rites; the veneration of holy places, shrines, images, vessels, furniture and vestments. Of the Sacraments, Baptism is developed into Confirmation on the one hand; into Penance, Purgatory and Indulgences on the other; and the Eucharist into the Real Presence, adoration of the Host, Resurrection of the body and the virtue of the relics. Again, the doctrine of the Sacraments leads to the doctrine of Justification; Justification to that of Original Sin; Original Sin to the merit of Celibacy.<sup>15</sup> This is an extraordinary passage, and any moderately attentive reader can hardly help but notice how extravagant the claims are that it advances. Although Newman does not even begin to explain, let alone demonstrate, how all these doctrines “follow” or “come” from the doctrines they allegedly follow or come from, he proclaims that they do with a sense bordering on infallible authority. T

So I conclude this section with key questions: Can a person who accepts the Roman claims of authority question the immaculate conception of Mary without raising corresponding doubts about the doctrines affirmed in the classic creeds? Are these doctrines so connected that the incarnation cannot stand without the immaculate conception? If one doubted

transubstantiation, would doubts about the Trinity inevitably follow? If one looked into the historical foundations of the papacy and found them wanting, would that person's faith in Christ crumble as well? It is important to emphasize that more is at stake here than an intellectual debate about logical consistency. This is a pastoral issue as well as a philosophical and theological one. Believers who think their right to believe in the resurrection of Jesus depends on their believing that the earth is only several thousand years old, or who think their right to believe in the incarnation and atonement of Jesus requires them to believe in the immaculate conception—such Christians are caught up in a position that is not only intellectually dubious but also spiritually precarious as well. The “right” to believe the saving truths of the gospel should never be held hostage by other beliefs that are peripheral at best.

Physical evolution could be thought necessary on the assumption of all-encompassing physical determinism. It could be claimed that all physical events and states of affairs are determined by laws of nature and previous states of the universe.

are canonical not because the church is infallible or because it created or constituted the canon, but because the church's reception of these books is a natural and inevitable outworking of the self-authenticating nature of Scripture.”<sup>10</sup>

when the canon is understood as self-authenticating, it is clear that the church did not choose the canon, but the canon, in a sense, chose itself. . . . I

How we define the canon will determine how we date its origin. If we define the canon ontologically, we can say that the canon existed in its entirety the minute after the final book of the NT was written, likely sometime in the first century. If we define the canon functionally, we could date it sometime in the mid-second century, if not before, when most of the books were being used as Scripture in the early church. I

Robert Bellarmine, in his attempt to refute Protestant divines, argued that the church is a “specific type of community (coetus hominum)”<sup>7</sup> that is marked by three leading traits: “The one and true Church is the community of men brought together by the profession of the same Christian faith and conjoined in the communion of the same sacraments, under the government of the legitimate pastors and especially the one vicar of Christ on earth, the Roman pontiff.”<sup>8</sup> The emphasis on this same troika of faith, sacraments, and hierarchical governance can be found more recently in the encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, proclaimed in May 1995 by John Paul II.

“The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (John 3:8).

The following controversial passage from Irenaeus's *Against Heresies* has been used to buttress the Petrine claims of Rome and its ecclesiastical power, especially during the fourth century and thereafter. I say, by indicating that tradition derived from the apostles, of the very great, the very ancient, and universally known Church founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul; as also [by pointing out] the faith preached to men, which comes down to our time by means of the successions of the bishops. For it is a matter of necessity that every Church should agree with this Church, on account of its preeminent authority, that is, the faithful everywhere, inasmuch as the apostolical tradition has been preserved continuously by those [faithful men] who exist everywhere.<sup>32</sup> This material, from the mid-second century, has posed a number of challenges for historians who seek to contextualize it within that temporal framework. First, as Eric Osborn has pointed out, this text, though composed by Irenaeus originally in Greek (only a few fragments remain), has come down to us as a full manuscript only in a later Latin translation composed around 380.<sup>33</sup> This translation was likely overseen by Damasus I, bishop of Rome, who was also superintending a revision or rewriting of the history of the imperial city in order to include key ecclesiastical events. Is there similarity between the statements of Irenaeus and the ecclesiastical realities of Rome during the fourth century? Can historians even pose such a question? Second, the passage from Irenaeus above indeed contains factual error, as Oscar Cullmann noted in his own day: “The Roman church in any case was not founded by Paul. That is entirely clear from his letter to the Romans.”<sup>34</sup> Beyond this, as one judges the content of Paul's *Epistle to the Romans*, especially those to whom the apostle sends greetings at the end of his letter (he does not greet Peter), it is clear that the church was already well established before Peter arrived. Together, these errors detract from the historical accuracy and therefore from the credibility of this material, raising further doubts for any interpreter. Third, J. B. Lightfoot observes that the language of “the succession of bishops” is employed by Irenaeus in the second century in a much different way than by the later church, that is, as the bricks and mortar of a far more developed hierarchical structure. “In other words, though he [Irenaeus] views the episcopate as a distinct office from the presbytery,” Lightfoot argues, “he does not regard it as a distinct order in the same sense in which the diaconate is a distinct order.”<sup>35</sup> In fact, Lightfoot continues, Irenaeus “seems to be wholly ignorant that the word bishop had passed from a lower value since the apostolic times.”<sup>36</sup> Fourth, in the nineteenth century Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe questioned how the Latin phrase *Ad hanc enim ecclesiam propter potiore[m] principalitatem necesse est omnem convenire ecclesiam* (“For it is a matter of necessity that every church should agree with this church, on account of its preeminent authority”) should be translated and interpreted. They maintain, “It is impossible to say with certainty of what words in the Greek original ‘potiore[m] principalitatem’ [preeminent authority; literally, preferential prominence] may be the translation.”<sup>37</sup> In the face of such ambiguity they conclude, “We are far from sure that the rendering given above is correct, but we have been unable

to think of anything better.”<sup>38</sup> Finally, regarding the last phrase of this much-debated paragraph (*hoc est eos qui sunt undique fideles*, in qua semper ab his qui sunt undique conservata est ea quae est ab apostolis traditio, or “the faithful everywhere, inasmuch as the apostolic tradition has been preserved continuously by those [faithful men] who exist everywhere”), J. N. D. Kelly offers a rendering that views Rome as neither the source nor the guardian of proper doctrine but instead as its exemplification. He reasons: “Hence it seems more plausible to take in qua with omnem . . . ecclesiam [the faithful everywhere] and to understand Irenaeus as suggesting that the Roman church supplies an ideal illustration.”<sup>39</sup> Kelly, therefore, concludes his analysis of this pericope, drawn from the writings of Irenaeus, by affirming, “There is therefore no allusion to the later Petrine claims of the Roman see.”<sup>40</sup> Indeed, given the doubts and the ambiguity that surround this passage, it is difficult to find a solid basis for the considerably broader claims to ecclesiastical power and privilege that came later.

In addition, Eamon Duffy explains, “Nor can we assume, as Irenaeus did, that the Apostles established there a succession of bishops to carry on their work in the city, for all the indications are that there was no single bishop at Rome for almost a century after the deaths of the Apostles. In fact, wherever we turn, the solid outlines of the Petrine succession at Rome seem to blur and dissolve.” Eamon Duffy, *Saints and Sinners: A History of the Popes*, 4th ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 2.

Protestant scholar Alister McGrath contends that “Paul treats baptism as a spiritual counterpart to circumcision (Col. 2:11–12), suggesting that the parallel may extend to its application to infants.”<sup>16</sup> However, upon further examination this association of circumcision and infant baptism quickly falls apart, especially when the larger Pauline corpus is taken into account. It is, therefore, not descriptive of apostolic intent and judgment. Consider this: circumcision as practiced by the Jews (the heirs of the covenantal promises of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) flowed along familial, racial lines indicative of a chosen people. Not only was circumcision a “sign of the covenant,” as Genesis 17:11 puts it, but it was also the mark that literally and physically distinguished this chosen people from the gentiles. To be a member of a particular family in effect made one an heir of the covenant. One was born into a favored, privileged relationship with the Most High. This is not, however, how Christian believers, both Jews and gentiles today, are related to Christ.

In the Mass, then, the Roman priest offers up Christ to the Father. But if the Father has already given the gift of the Son, which is abundantly evident at Golgotha (“God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness,” Rom. 3:25a, emphasis added) and celebrated in the Supper with thanksgiving, then why is the gift returned?

whereas the death of Christ caused the temple curtain to be torn in two, from top to bottom, signifying that the way is now open between God and humanity (Matt. 27:51), the very architecture of Roman Catholic (and Eastern Orthodox) churches (with its rails, gates, altars, sanctuary, and tabernacles), put in place by a misunderstanding of the Supper (most notably in the doctrine of transubstantiation, though Eastern Orthodoxy itself does not affirm this exact doctrine,

Paul’s warnings about “discerning the body” (see 1 Cor. 11:29) do not have to do with the theology of the Supper but with factionalism in the church. Those who exclude other believers because of different beliefs about the Supper fail to discern the body.<sup>85</sup>

apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians points out that the old covenant, along with its many sacrifices, was a “ministry that brought death,” a “ministry that brought condemnation” and as such was “transitory” (3:7–11).

After a few false starts and halfhearted attempts by Anicetus, Soter, and Eleutherus,<sup>27</sup> Victor eventually emerged as a full-blown monarchical bishop of Rome around the third quarter of the second century; he distinguished himself by exercising the power and authority normally identified with this office. In the following century the bishop of Rome, Stephen I, began to gather up some of the powers and honors attributed to the apostle Peter, and in a bold move he then turned around and applied them all to himself.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, “Stephen’s invocation of Matthew 16 is the first known claim by a pope to an authority derived exclusively from Peter.”<sup>29</sup> “In effect,” as Arlo Nau observes, “[Stephen] became a Peter redivivus, the Peter of Matthew 16:17–19 reborn.”<sup>30</sup> Moreover, though Damasus in the fourth century added to the claims of the bishop of Rome, the full aggregate of such was not yet in place, so he himself was not actually a pope. He was, however, the first to claim that his “see” of ecclesiastical governance was in reality the apostolic see, going back in a supposed succession to the first century. Therefore, although Damasus’s self-perceived authority at the time does, after all, represent something of a transition, he didn’t trouble himself either with the proof of his specific claim of jurisdiction or with the details of church history.<sup>31</sup> All these bishops of Rome whom we have just considered were relatively minor figures; their importance, remarkably enough, grew by leaps and bounds only after their deaths, when the institution of the papacy eventually came into being in a preeminent way.

Leo was and remained an important bishop in the West: due to the powers and prerogatives he exercised there, especially in the city of Rome itself, Leo may rightly be referred to as a pope. Indeed, in the eyes of some historians Leo in effect constitutes the first pope simply because he exercises so many of the powers and prerogatives that pertain to what actually

constitutes this office, at least in the West.

Martin Luther, for his part, believed that it was neither Leo I nor Gregory I but Boniface III. How did Luther come to this judgment? In the early seventh century it was Boniface who was able to convince Phocas, the emperor of the Byzantine Empire, that the Roman bishop, and he alone, was “the head of all churches.”<sup>41</sup>

By the middle of the third century Stephen I, the bishop of Rome from 254 to 257, began to appropriate to himself “all the accumulated prerogatives of Peter”<sup>96</sup> in a dispute with Cyprian and with Firmilian, bishop of Caesarea, though the latter “not only [did] not accept the claim, he seems never to have heard it before.”

Or consider the postresurrection account found in John 20:19–23, a passage that in many respects parallels the language of Matthew 16:19: “And with that he [Jesus] breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven’” (vv. 22–23). Notice that in this context the referent for “you,” as in “you forgive,” is the Spirit-anointed assembly. Accordingly one interpretation that must be excluded for its lack of plausibility here in John and therefore elsewhere in its parallel in Matthew is that Jesus has an individual in mind when he speaks these words. The grammatical form of the verb in this verse is not the second-person singular but the second-person plural. So then it is a charismatic office that is being explored in this setting, one that is corporately held. Thus the people of God, animated by the Holy Spirit, hold the power of the keys. The divine presence and activity in the entire community must ever be in view.

Dictatus Papae, was actually written by Gregory VII himself. At any rate, it was indeed listed in his papal register in 1075, and as a consequence this artifact does appear to represent Gregory’s own views. Since the Dictatus Papae is a good window on the papacy (as an institution that was made up of numerous claims that slowly emerged and that were repeated over time), it will be cited at length. The relevant articles are as follows: 1. That the Roman church was founded by God alone. 2. That the Roman pontiff alone can with right be called universal. 8. That he alone may use the imperial insignia. 9. That of the pope alone all princes shall kiss the feet. 10. That his name alone shall be spoken in the churches. 11. That this is the only name in the world. 12. That it may be permitted to him to depose emperors. 16. That no synod shall be called a general one without his order. 17. That no chapter and no book shall be considered canonical without his authority. 19. That he himself may be judged by no one. 22. That the Roman church has never erred; nor will it err to all eternity, the Scripture bearing witness. 26. That he who is not at peace with the Roman church shall not be considered catholic.<sup>5</sup>

It does not insist that popes must be perfect, or even that they would all be model Christians, although the latter might be a reasonable expectation given the NT criteria and qualifications for elders and bishops (1 Tim. 3:1–7). We might reasonably expect that the “chief shepherd,” the bishop of bishops, would meet the NT criteria for bishops. However, the statement does not insist on this, but merely says that they should all be persons of moral integrity, with a sincere love for Christ and the gospel.

the better comparison is not between the OT kings and the papacy but between the OT prophets and the papacy. When we consider the OT prophets, all who are recognized as true prophets were indeed persons of basic moral integrity and genuine love for God, even prophets like Jonah, who were less than perfect in reflecting God’s love and grace. If all the prophets whom God called were persons of integrity and true faith, it hardly seems too much to think that all the “chief shepherds

sola Scriptura is not Protestantism’s fundamental doctrine. The fundamental doctrine of Protestantism is the essential claim of the gospel: that Christ died for our sins, that he was raised from the dead, that we are saved by grace through faith, and the like. Sola scriptura is a fundamental claim about the nature of authority, but it is not a first-order doctrine in the same sense as the incarnation, the resurrection, and the Trinity.

despite her undoubted sanctity, for the reason that John Calvin had recognized in his own age: “It is a common opinion among them, that we need intercessors, because in ourselves we are unworthy of appearing in the presence of God. By speaking in this manner, they deprive Christ of his honour.”<sup>44</sup> So although w

This language of “infused” has led Darrell Bock and Mikel Del Rosario to observe, “And so in the Medieval as well as the Post-Reformation Catholic Church, grace is treated almost as if it’s a substance, something that can be dispensed through various avenues of change and means through the magisterium.”<sup>16</sup>

Origen in the third century, who in his commentary on Romans 3:28 states: “It remains for us who are trying to affirm everything the apostle says, and to do so in the proper order, to inquire who is justified by faith alone, apart from works.”<sup>55</sup> Ambrosiaster reasoned as follows: “How then can the Jews think that the

Canon 32, for instance, opines: “If any one saith, that the good works of one that is justified are in such manner the gifts of God, that they are not also the good merits of him that is justified, . . . [that person] does not truly merit increase of grace,

eternal life, and the attainment of that eternal life; . . . let him be anathema.”<sup>62</sup>

Notice the general nature of this grace: “Is anyone among you sick?” If this is the case, then one should call for the elders. Mark’s passage is even more instructive along these lines: “They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them” (6:12–13). In this second setting, with its strong evangelistic note, it appears that the disciples, whom Jesus sent out two by two, were anointing not the sick of the church but a much more general population: those who had responded to the preaching of the disciples and who were therefore now in a state of repentance. H